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A Phenomenological Case Study Of Staff Attrition In Early Childhood Education

ED 454 995

Paper presented at the Annual Conference of the American Educational Research Association, Seattle, 2001

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Introduction

The continuing high rates of staff attrition in early childhood education remain an ongoing concern as program quality is largely dependent on a committed, well-qualified and stable workforce (Manlove, 1994; Manlove & Guzell, 1997; Wangmann, 1995). Many factors militate against efforts to retain staff. These include relatively poor remuneration and working conditions, low professional status within the broader community, and the highly demanding, sometimes conflicting roles and responsibilities of early childhood educators and the physical and emotional exhaustion that these can engender (Goelman & Guo, 1998; Manlove, 1993; Stremmel, 1991; Stremmel, Benson & Powell, 1993). The influence of the work place environment has also come under scrutiny, particularly in countries such as Australia, where salaries for early childhood educators compare favorably to those in many parts of North America but attrition rates are at least as high (Hayden, 1997).

Despite the voluminous literature about attrition, empirical and conceptual gaps persist (Goelman & Guo, 1998). Previous studies — mostly quantitative, cross-sectional survey investigations — have identified variables that correlate with attrition. Yet, as Goelman and Guo note, fine-grained analyses that illuminate the "lived experience" underpinning decisions to leave the field are needed to complement and extend existing understandings. Goelman and Guo call particularly for longitudinal studies that contextualize and temporalize these experiences.

In this paper, I respond to their enjoiner to broaden the conceptual and methodological base of investigations of attrition by reporting a phenomenological case study that explored the blossoming and wilting of an early childhood educator's career commitment and her eventual decision to leave the field. The study spans a seven year period from the commencement of Sarah's* preservice program to her fifth and final year in the field. My aims are two-fold: first, to contribute insights that might further existing understandings of attrition; second, to explore the potential of metaphor to assist in illuminating these understandings.

Theoretical Orientation

The study is situated within an interpretivist tradition that gives priority to understanding the meaning that individuals make of their experiences (Garrick, 1999). More specifically, it is informed by phenomenological perspectives that focus on

describing how people experience their world and what it is like to be in that world (van Manen, 1990). To this end, I employ metaphor analysis, an heuristic tool that has proved helpful in investigating the perspectives of preservice teachers (Bullough & Stokes, 1994; Knowles, 1994; Munby, 1986) and, more recently, the perspectives of directors of early childhood centers (Jorde-Bloom, 2000).

Metaphors are devices for making sense of one experience or phenomena in terms of another (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). They are fundamental to our attempts to find coherence in, and to make sense of, our world. As Lakoff and Johnson, explain:

> We seek out personal metaphors to highlight and make coherent our own pasts, our present activities, and our dreams, hopes and goals, as well. A large part of self-understanding is the search for appropriate personal metaphors that make sense of our lives. (p. 233)

Metaphors are constructions of meaning that encapsulate our current understandings while extending and expanding them. In this sense, they can be likened to a bridge that links "the known and the unknown, the tangible and the less tangible, the familiar and the new" and enables "passage from one world to another" (Cortazzi & Jin, 1999, p. 149, citing Shiff, 1979). Here, I draw on the notion of metaphor as bridge to explore the metaphors that underpinned and shaped Sarah's becoming, being and "unbecoming" an early childhood educator.

In my attempts to make meaning of Sarah's lived experience as an early childhood professional, her interpretations of that experience, and her eventual decision to leave the field, I draw, as well, on two related metaphors. The first is that becoming / being /unbecoming an early childhood educator constitutes a journey during which one must continually negotiate the challenges and complexities one encounters (Cole & Knowles, 2000). The second is that this journey is dialectical. In its unfolding, it takes one through diverse professional landscapes characterized by different spaces, places, people and events (Clandinin & Connelly, 1995). Throughout one's journey, one both shapes and is shaped by the landscapes through which one travels (Clandinin & Connelly, 1995). Before describing the landscapes Sarah encountered in her journey, the metaphors she used to make sense of her experiences, and how these reflected and contributed to her eventual decision to discontinue her journey, I briefly introduce Sarah and explain the context and methods of the study.

Context

Sarah entered her preservice early childhood teacher education program as an 18 year-old high school leaver from a socially and economically advantaged Anglo-Australian background. For as long as she could remember, she had wanted to become an early childhood educator. As a young child, she explained, she had "spent hours playing school". She recalled her childhood as "a wonderful experience — secure, stable, supportive, and loving". As an early childhood educator, she anticipated that she could help children have similarly "happy memories".

The three-year preservice program in which Sarah enrolled had recently undergone substantial revision. One major change was the considerable emphasis now placed on reflective practice as a basis for personal-professional development. Within the preservice program, reflective practice was used as a generic term for processes involved in exploring experience as a means of enhancing understanding. Preservice teachers were encouraged and assisted to interpret the meanings they gave to these experiences in the light of their beliefs, values and developing professional knowledge. In doing so, they were expected to engage in a number of reflective processes that they were encouraged to incorporate into their professional practice. These processes included looking back on their experiences, decisions and actions; recognizing the beliefs and values underpinning these decisions and actions; considering a range of possible consequences and implications of their actions and beliefs; and investigating alternatives and reconsidering former viewpoints. This developmental orientation to reflection, as opposed to a technical or social justice orientation (Zeichner, 1992), was consistent with the humanitarian-progressive tradition underpinning the program. Graduates exited the program with a Bachelor of Teaching (Early Childhood) degree that qualified them to teach children aged from birth to eight years of age in child care centers, preschools and the early years of school. Sarah's subsequent career path reflected the flexibility of employment options available to graduates of the program. Her first appointment was as Year 1-2 teacher of six- to seven-year old children in a small elementary school in outer-suburban Sydney. Four years later, she accepted a position as a teacher of three- to four-year olds in a large community-managed preschool in a semi-rural location. The children in both settings were primarily from Anglo-Australian families of mixed socio-economic backgrounds.

Sarah's cohort was the first to progress through the revised preservice program. My involvement in the revision of the program prompted me to follow a group of students from this cohort through their preservice years and into their early years of teaching. The case study of Sarah reported here is drawn from that larger, ongoing investigation.

Of all the participants in the larger study, Sarah impressed me as the most likely to enjoy a rewarding and enduring career as an early childhood educator. Indeed, her long held ambition to teach, her warm and engaging manner, her interpersonal skills, her energy and passion, and her impressive practicum reports suggested that she had the potential to make an outstanding contribution to the field. Why, then, did such a talented, enthusiastic and seemingly committed prospective early childhood educator decide to cut short what seemed, to both Sarah and me, such a promising career in the early childhood field?

Method

Sarah's metaphors, which form the basis of this paper, were elicited during in-depth, conversational interviews between March 1993 and April 2000. Our first conversation took place three weeks after Sarah commenced her preservice program. We continued our conversations on at least four occasions each year for the next seven years. We met in many locations, including my office on the University campus, Sarah's practicum placements and classroom and local cafes. I audio-taped and transcribed our conversations and returned the transcripts, as well as drafts of this paper, to Sarah for comment.

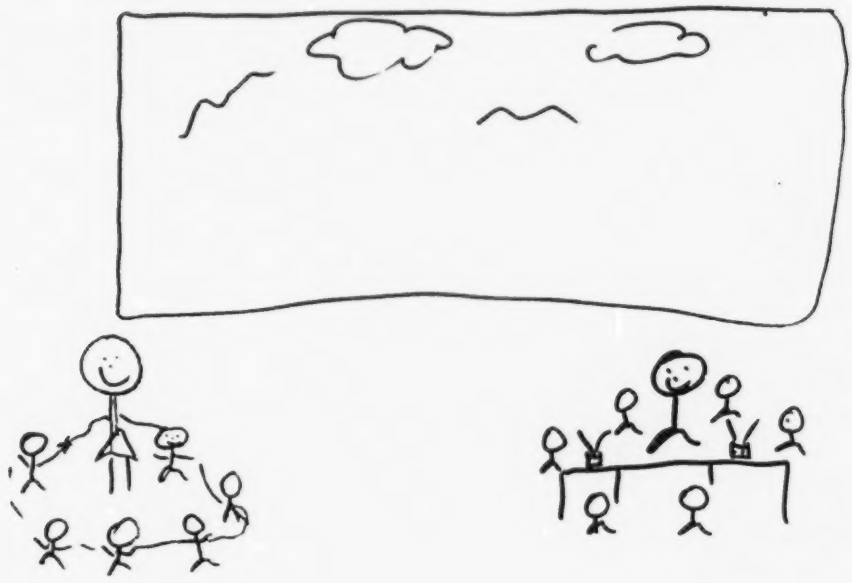
Frequently, our conversations began with an invitation to Sarah to represent what meaning she was making from her experiences, initially as a preservice teacher, and later as an early childhood educator in the beginning stages of her career. She responded enthusiastically to my suggestion that she explore alternative forms of representation such as drawings and three-dimensional constructions. As others have similarly found, these alternative forms seemed to assist in articulating previously tacit understandings and unexamined tensions (Black & Halliwell, 2000) and in bringing "to light nuances and ambivalences ... that might otherwise remain hidden" (Weber & Mitchell, 1996 p. 303). In what follows, I present a selection of Sarah's representations that, to me, most powerfully illuminate the blossoming and wilting of her career commitment.

Sarah's Metaphors

1993: The wall at the back of my classroom

When Sarah entered her preservice program she was tremendously excited about becoming an early childhood educator. "I am about to begin a really exciting part of my life. I have wanted to teach young children for as long as I can remember, and finally, it is a dream come true!", she commented in her first week at university. Her goal was to teach in the early years of school, rather than in prior-to-school settings. "I want a classroom of my own", she explained. She especially looked forward to reliving her favorite memories of her own school experiences by "giving out coloring stencils, going-home and marking books, and putting stickers in them". At the same time, she was determined that her classroom would promote "creativity and choice and freedom". Sarah represented her vision by drawing, in rainbow hues, "a wall at the back of my classroom where the children can paint and draw whatever they like" (Figure 1). The "wall" symbolized the environment she wanted to create as an early -- childhood educator, and delimited it from the more traditional, and somewhat confining, classrooms she recalled as a child.

Figure 1: The wall at the back of my classroom



The metaphor of the wall was instrumental in alerting Sarah to the inconsistencies in her vision. It also provided a focus for her efforts to resolve the tensions between wanting, on the one hand, to recreate her favorite school experiences and, on the other, to allow children freedom of choice. Absorbed by the inherent complexities and inviting possibilities that she sensed would be open to her as early childhood educator, her excitement about becoming a teacher and her commitment to creating a child-centered classroom escalated into a "passionate creed" (Laboskey, 1994). Her passionate creed was to guide and sustain her throughout her preservice program.

At the same time, however, her metaphor and the passion it engendered seemed, in retrospect, to cast potential future shadows over her long-term commitment to the field. Would it make her more vulnerable, than she would have been otherwise, to the risk of being shattered by the realities of teaching (Cole & Knowles, 1993)? And did her expectation of a "classroom of her own" in some ways anticipate the professional isolation that Sarah was later to find so problematic?

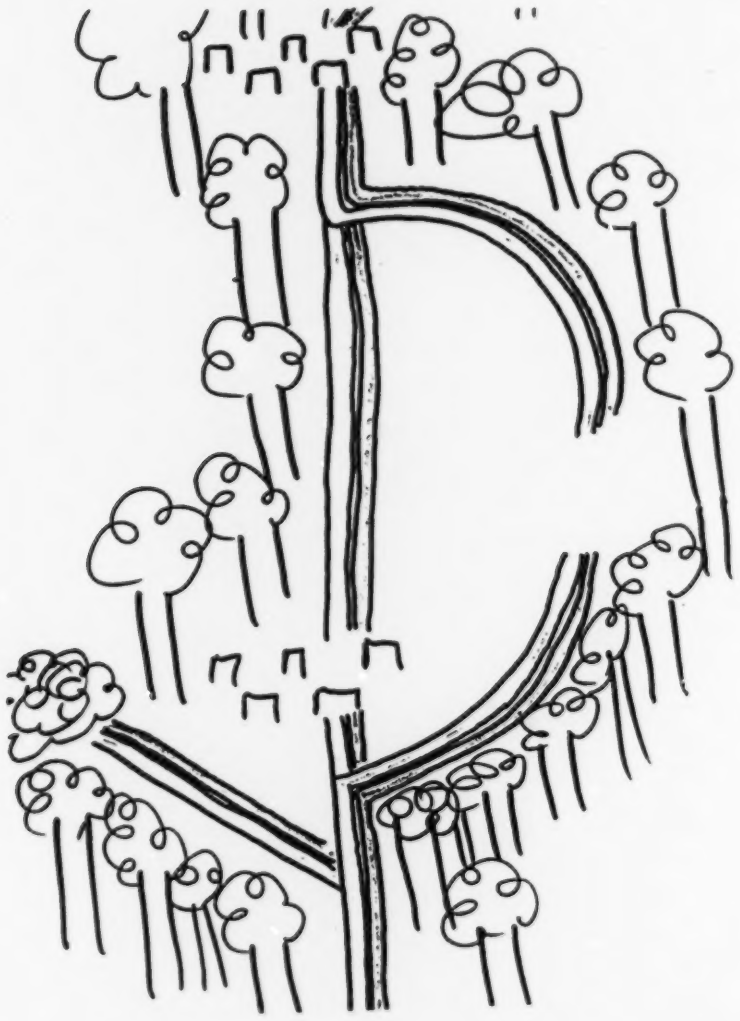
1994: The journey through the forest

During Sarah's second year in the preservice program, the rainbow colored hues of her earlier representation crystallized into an enduring motif of the "rainbow path" she would travel along as an early childhood educator (see Figure 2). "Rainbows don't end", she explained. "They are very bright and positive. They are good to think of when things don't go right". A lot of things did not "go right" that year for Sarah, including a particularly challenging practicum. Her metaphor of her journey through the forest, illuminated by the rainbow path, sustained her as she persevered with the challenges she encountered. She elaborated:

> Sometimes the [rainbow] path takes you to unknown places. It's like walking in a forest because you don't know what is ahead of you. There are so many unexpected paths, and it's up to you to decide which ones to take. You have to make up your own mind. The paths leading off the main path are where I need to make decisions. Some of these paths lead you to where you might not want to go; they lead to clouds that cover up the rainbow. To get back to where you want to go, you have to analyze what happened to see where you went wrong. I try to see what I can learn from things that don't go the way I want them too. I think about how I could change things and make different decisions next time. And that helps to get you back on track. But sometimes you chose a side path

that works out really well. And when you join up with the main path again, you realize that you have come a long way in your journey. And sometimes there are hurdles on the path that stop you from going where you want to go. I can see that the hurdles are there, so they are different from the side paths, which are unexpected, and I try in advance to plan the best way to tackle them. You have to work really hard at them, but you eventually succeed.

Figure 2: The journey through the forest



Sarah's metaphor of her journey through the forest illustrated her commitment to reflective practice. It also highlighted her persistence, her readiness to grapple with the challenges of professional practice, and her considerable sense of personal agency. These qualities, and her focus on intrinsic rewards, evident in her rainbow motif, seemed to augur well for her long term commitment to the field (Nias, 1989). Yet this metaphor, like her initial metaphor of the wall at the back of her classroom, also foreshadowed questions about the sustainability of her commitment. Let me explain.

Sarah's appreciation of the complexity of professional practice, her reflexivity, her active engagement in constructing her own understandings of what it means to be an early childhood educator, and her recognition that professional growth was a life long endeavor were congruent with the philosophy and aims of the preservice program. Consequently, Sarah perceived her teacher educators to be supportive of her passion and her efforts to achieve her vision.

Mclean (1999) reminds us that "becoming a teacher is "a process of choosing yourself — making deeply personal choices about who you will be" (p. 60). The process of becoming, however, is not "a solitary or self-contained process — it occurs in a time and space where others, some much more powerful than yourself, also are bent on constructing 'you' in an image they value" (McLean, p. 60, citing Maxine Greene [1981] and Deborah Britzman [1991]). Would Sarah manage to sustain her commitment to a career in early childhood education, I wondered, in a context less supportive of her passion, her vision, and the way in which she was constructing her professional self and her professional practice?

1995: My path to professionalism: bringing together the pieces of the puzzle

During Sarah's third and final year in her preservice program, the trepidation and uncertainty characterizing her journey through the forest gave way to an emerging and welcome sense of coherency, which she represented as a more clearly delineated "path to professionalism" (Figure 3a). The rainbow colored path comprised multiple, interlinking parts, like those of a puzzle (Figure 3 b). "These are all the pieces I think about in becoming a teacher", Sarah explained.

> I'm at a stage where I'm drawing a lot of knowledge together. I'm creating the puzzle with bits of information from all my courses at university. Like "A for Advocacy"; B for Balanced Program; C for child centered; D for Developmentally Appropriate Practice; E for evaluation". They are all separate

issues but when you put them together, like in a puzzle, they all relate. I like to see things linking, so I'm working on that. But drawing everything that you believe in together is difficult. But, to me, ... you separate the pieces of the puzzle, then they become isolated words. It's only when they come together that it all works. But I find it hard trying to bring everything together, because I don't think I'll ever see myself in just one way as a teacher. I think I'll always see myself in a different light in new situations. So I find that the emphasis that I place on each of the pieces in the puzzle isn't necessarily stable.

Figure 3a: My path to professionalism

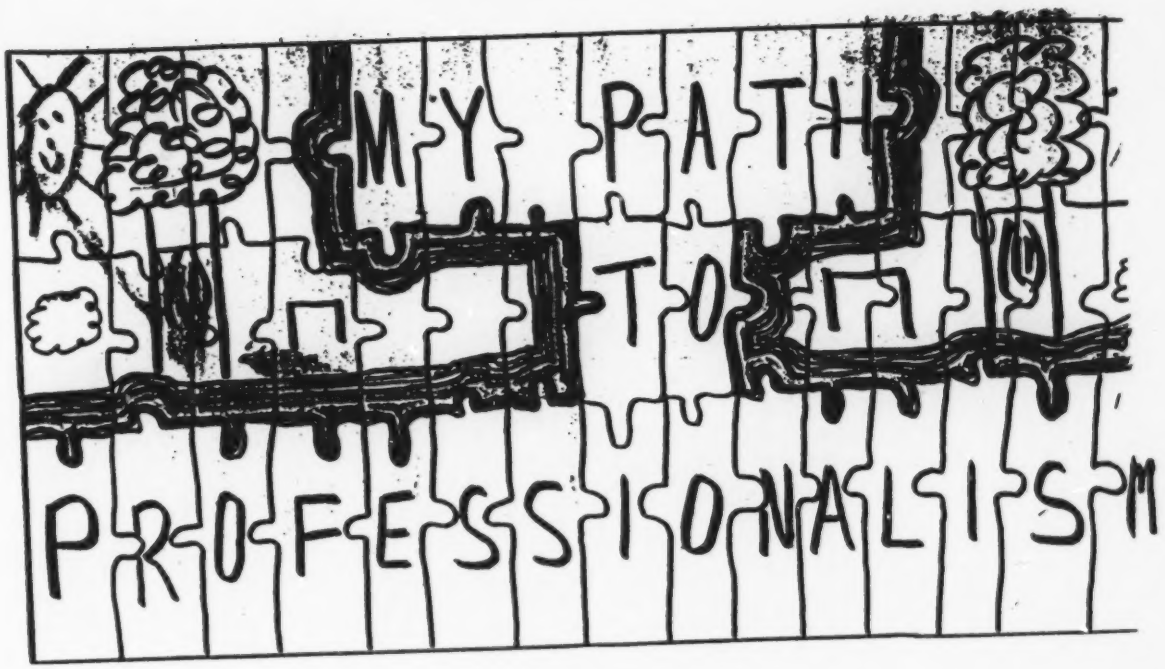


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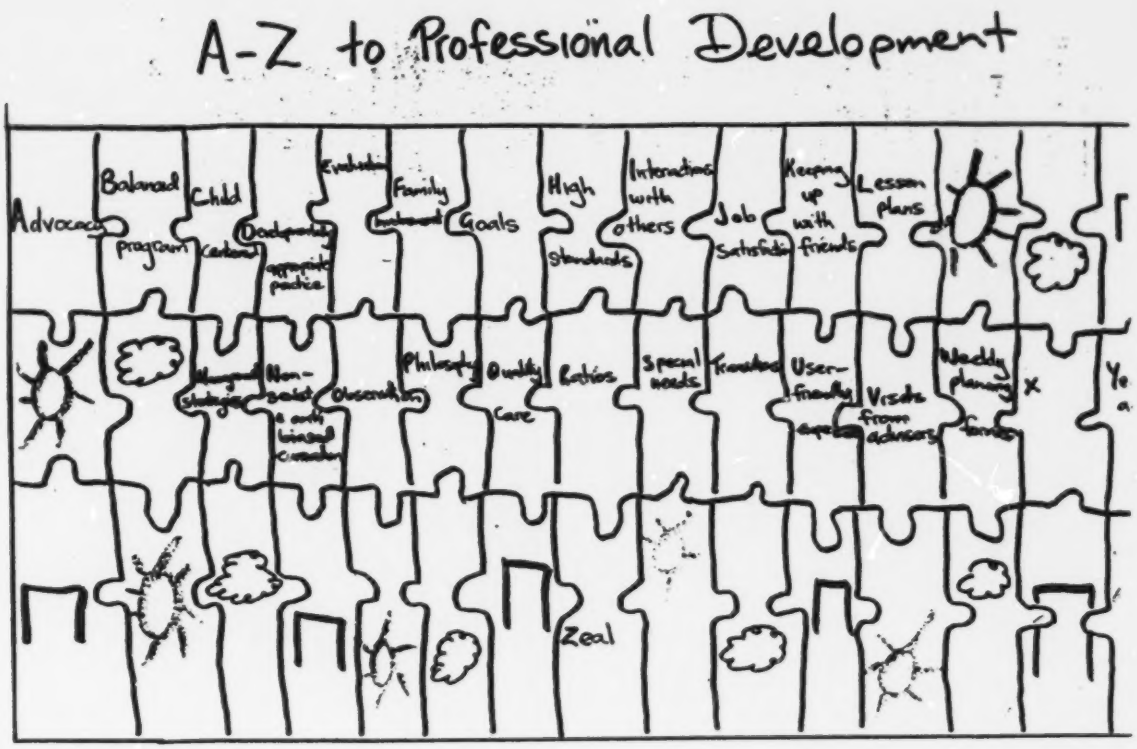
Figure 3b: Bringing together the pieces of the puzzle



On many counts, Sarah's metaphor again gave cause for optimism concerning her career commitment. In particular, it reflected her sense of emerging professional confidence and competence and her readiness to make the transition from preservice preparation to professional practice. But would these qualities be sufficient to sustain her through the challenges she would almost inevitably encounter in the early stages of her career (see, for example, Bullough, Knowles & Crow, 1991; Kuzmic, 1994; Veenman, 1984)? Moreover, would her commitment to reflective inquiry and to her continuing professional growth, which had been nurtured in her preservice program, dissolve under the stress of dealing with these challenges? Further, might her metaphor represent idealized images that she could find herself "unable to actualize or even approximate" (Cole, 1997, p.15). And, if so, might subsequent disappointment and disillusionment begin to undermine her enthusiasm and confidence and, subsequently, her commitment to the field?

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1996: The candle and the tunnel

As it turned out, Sarah weathered the disorientation, anxieties and challenges of her transition from preservice teacher to practitioner, and her first year in the field, relatively easily. She explained:

> My first impression was of walking into a situation that was so different and so scary, like a dark tunnel. It was up to me to find the light. But I had a candle and on the candle you can see my rainbow path that I took with me into my new job. It lit up all the paths that I can choose from in my teaching, and in my choices as a teacher. When I have really bad days, it's like my candle isn't glowing. I can't see my path as well, and it seems like there is just one way. And it seems like you can't make decisions. It's like you've just got to plod through the tunnel.

Figure 4: The candle-stick and the tunnel

Here, Sarah's metaphor alluded to the "new and different reality" into which beginning early childhood educators are catapulted and which may be at odds with the ideals developed during the preservice years (Cole, 1992, p. 366). The professional landscape of the school in which Sarah accepted her first position was indeed at odds with her vision of an informal, project-based classroom that had guided her throughout her preservice program. She was disconcerted to find that her colleagues, without exception, were committed to traditional teaching practices and highly structured programs. Yet, unlike many beginning teachers, Sarah, sustained by her

metaphor and her commitment to reflection, was able to resist "being socialized to adopt norms of compliance and conformity" (Cole, 1997, p.15).

By the end of Sarah's first year in the school, our conversations were imbued with her growing sense of professional competence and her intense enjoyment of her work. She spoke of the respectful relationships she had established with the children in her class, the project-based curriculum she had implemented, her developing relationships with parents, and her friendship with one of her colleagues. Her school principal spoke highly of her energy and commitment, and she was invited by her former teacher educators to talk to preservice teachers about her practice.

Sarah's successful first year seemed to enhance the likelihood of her making a long-term career commitment to early childhood education, for attrition occurs most frequently during the early years in the field (Manlove & Guzell, 1997). Yet, as Cole (1997) points out, those who, like Sarah, resist institutional norms and "strive to uphold their beliefs, including beliefs associated with their own growth as reflective practitioners, do so usually at great cost" (p.15). Some indication of those costs, for Sarah, began to emerge in her next metaphors.

1997: The garden

Sarah likened her second year in the field to "walking in a beautiful, well-established garden". As in the forest and the tunnel, there were many paths within the garden and many "choices about which paths to take" (See Figure 5). To Sarah, it was vital that she take the paths that would enable her to tend and care for the garden. "Because the garden is so beautiful, you have a responsibility not to ruin it", she explained. Gesturing to a rainbow-colored footbridge bridge in the center of her drawing, she continued:

> So if you come across a problem in the garden, say a footbridge that is in poor repair, you shouldn't just ignore it, or try to repair it using ugly materials. You should try to make sure that the repair blends in with the beauty of the rest of the environment, rather than just patching it up with any old simplistic measure that comes to hand. But some teachers choose not to do that. And some don't even see there is a problem; they don't want to try new ideas. They get stuck in the one spot where they are treading on the flowers. They don't realize it, but they are ruining the garden.

Figure 5: The garden

The images of nurturing and growth in Sarah's metaphor resonate with those of many early childhood educators who have made a long-term commitment to the field (see, for example, Ceglowski, 1994; Jorde Bloom, 2000; Nias,1989). Moreover, Sarah's self efficacy suggests that she has moved well beyond the so-called "survival phase" (Katz, 1972) of her career. In these respects, her metaphor warrants optimism about her long-term commitment. This metaphor is significant, however, in that it disrupted her earlier emphasis on professional practice as a primarily individual undertaking, enacted in isolation. In this sense, her metaphor is pivotal to understanding her eventual decision to leave the field.

The centrality of the footbridge in Sarah's metaphor signifies her shift in focus from what Clandinin and Connelly (1995) refer to as the personal-professional landscape of her classroom environment to the communal-professional landscape of the wider school community. To Sarah, the broader landscape was characterized by her colleagues' seemingly entrenched practices, their lack of passion, and their disinterest in professional renewal. "I'm working with people who don't care about new and exciting things", she commented. "If the parents are happy and the school is running smoothly, then that's all that really matters to them". With considerable disappointment, she gradually came to realize that her zone of influence would be minimal within this landscape of "fragmented individualism" (Hargreaves, 1997),

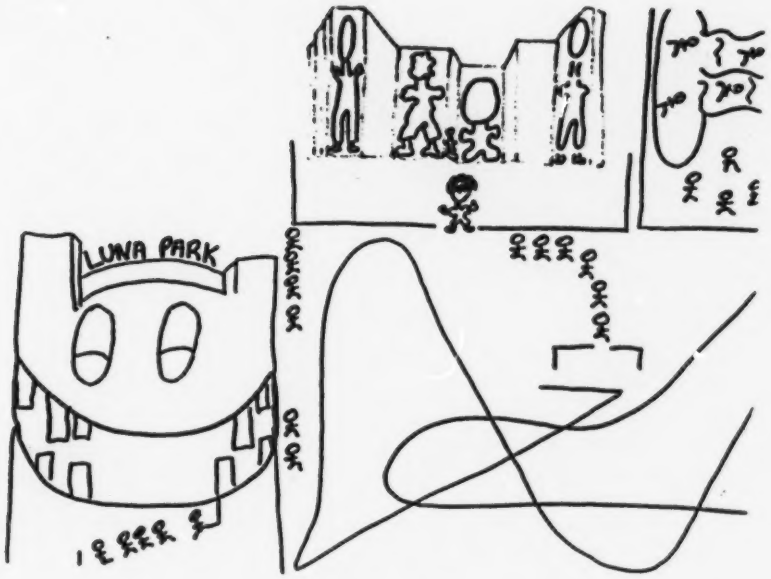
with its "norms of privacy, isolationism and conservatism, and a general lack of enthusiasm for substantive growth and change" (Knowles, Cole & Squire, 1999, p. 375).

1998: The theme park

By her third year in the field, perceiving her passion ignored by her colleagues, and frustrated by their unreceptiveness, Sarah had relinquished her hope of finding a more collegially rewarding communal-professional landscape and retreated into the personal-professional landscape of her classroom. Her garden metaphor, having "outlived its usefulness" was supplanted by the more complex and dynamic metaphor of a theme park (See Figure 6). "Because of all the mechanisms in the theme park and all that happens there, and because it is all interconnected, there is more for me to relate to", she explained.

> There's the roller coaster with all its ups and downs; that's what teaching is like... And then you've got the hall of mirrors and the reflection that you see of yourself as a teacher. But the reflection is often distorted by what is going on around us. When I was putting a lot of effort into making my classroom so child-centered, I was so excited about it and I wanted to share what was happening with people, but no-one seemed to be interested, they didn't really care. When you get a completely different reaction from what you had expected that distorts the image you have of yourself, even if it doesn't change your thoughts, deep down ...But where I see myself in the theme park is in one of those "small worlds" where there is a separate, enclosed area; an area that is more "together" — more secure and less threatening, more a sense of community. People don't get hurt; there are challenges but it's not really scary. You feel more in control.

Figure 6: The theme park



Here, Sarah's metaphor reflected her decision to trade collegiality and conformity for the autonomy to pursue her vision. The "small world" of her classroom represented a sanctuary from the seeming indifference of her colleagues; a place in which she could continue to nurture the passion that had been instrumental in sustaining her career commitment throughout her preservice program and in her beginning years of teaching. As Clandinin and Connelly (1995) note, "the privacy of the classroom ... is a safe place ...where teachers are free to live their stories [metaphors] of practice" (p.13). Sarah's retreat to her "small world" enabled her to realize her vision of the child-centered classroom first referred to in her initial representation made at the beginning of her preservice program "I can't believe how much I have been able to achieve. This is exactly the sort of teacher I always wanted to be", she commented.

Initially, her decision to retreat from the communal-professional landscape of the school to the personal-professional landscape of her classroom brought rewards that seemed likely to sustain her career commitment. Gradually, however, the inordinate investment of time required to maintain the initiatives she had implemented

in her classroom, coupled with the lack of collegial interest, support or stimulation, depleted her reserves of emotions and energy and exacerbated her feelings of professional isolation and loneliness. "Because what I am doing is so different to the other teachers, I can't talk over ideas with them. So I'm getting no input and I'm not being challenged. It's hard to maintain enthusiasm by myself", she commented. The correlation between perceived lack of collegiality and burnout (Goelman & Guo, 1998) suggested that her long-term commitment to the field could be at risk.

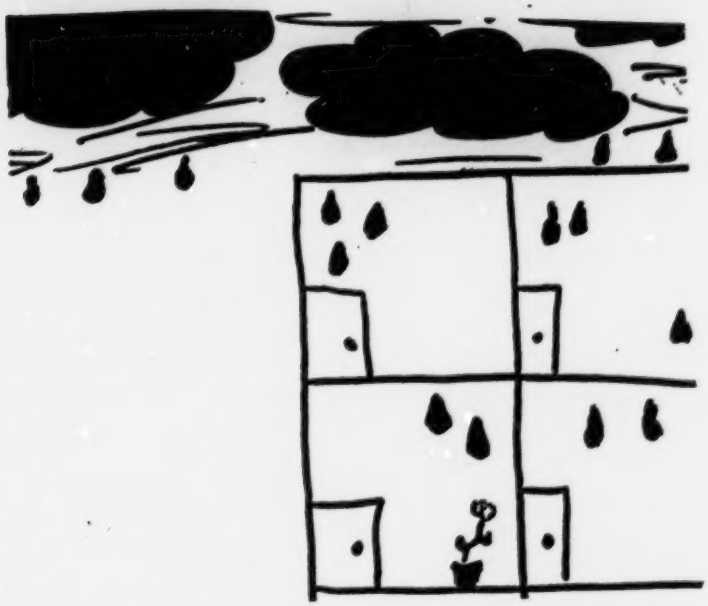
1999: The rain clouds

During her fourth year in the field, Sarah's efforts to compensate for her lack of professional connectedness by immersing herself in the personal-professional landscape of her classroom exacerbated her rapidly escalating sense of personal and professional disconnectedness. She became acutely aware and increasingly resentful, for example, of how the time demanded by her work left little time or energy for maintaining contact with friends. She commented:

> There are too many things that engulf you as a teacher and I'm beginning to think that my enjoyment of the profession doesn't outweigh the negative things. Most of all, there is the workload — and the fact that it eats so much into your life. And no matter what anyone says, if you're a dedicated teacher, then you are going to have a massive workload... . And I'm realizing more and more that I'm too much of a perfectionist. It eats away at me. I want to stop being like that. I need to be able to say "I'm just going to stop!" I am too drained by the end of the day to see my friends or to get involved in other things. I don't want to get so consumed in my work that I don't have time for other people. ...I've let teaching take over my life.

Sarah also found it increasingly difficult to summon the energy to resist the insidious impact of the conservatism of her colleagues and their lack of openness to new possibilities. The heavy, dark rain clouds, evident in Sarah's next representation (See Figure 7), began to obscure her rainbow-colored vision. Despite her best efforts to seal off the personal-professional space of her classroom from the depleting effect her colleagues had on her enthusiasm, slowly but relentlessly, rain began to seep through into her protected and protective space. Over time, the rain continued to dampen, and eventually erode, her passion for teaching.

Figure 7: The rain clouds



As her fourth year in the field unfolded, Sarah became increasingly aware that the diminishing satisfaction she was gaining from her teaching no longer compensated for the sacrifices she was making. Familiar now with the rhythmical cycles of the school year and lacking professional stimulation, she felt increasingly restless, dissatisfied and bored. "I'm not being challenged", she said sadly. "Sometimes I think that there just has to be something more to teaching than this".

At the year's end, she was distressed and deeply saddened to realize how little emotional satisfaction she gained from the many expressions of appreciation and thanks she received from the families of the children in her class. "Those kind of things just don't tug at my heart anymore", she explained. Sarah's previously sustaining passion began to dissolve; the costs of commitment to being an early childhood teacher were proving too high. For the first time, she seriously entertained thoughts of leaving the field. The sense of depletion, so evident in Sarah's representation resonates with the emphasis on emotional exhaustion in many explanations of burnout (Liston, 2000; Manlove, 1994; Mattingly, 1977; Stremmel, Benson & Powell, 1993). The likelihood of her managing to maintain a long-term commitment to the field now seemed much reduced.

2000: The choking vine

What first appeared an unexpected salvation occurred at the beginning of Sarah's fifth year in the field. Her reputation within the wider teaching community as

a talented and innovative young teacher had spread, and led to the offer of a position in a preschool close to her home. Officially, she would be a teacher of three- to four-year olds; unofficially, a change agent who would work closely with the newly appointed preschool director to implement Reggio-Emilia influenced philosophies and practices (for elaboration, see Edwards, Gandini, & Foreman, 1998) into what had previously been a highly structured program. Excited by the resonance between her own philosophy and the planned direction for the preschool, and warmed by the director's passion, Sarah eagerly accepted the position.

Sarah was confident that her own passion would be the re-ignited by this welcome recognition of her enthusiasm and her talents, and sustained by the opportunities for collegiality and continued professional growth that her new job seemed to offer. She was confident, too, that the minimal commuting time to her new job would enable her to commit herself to long hours at work, while still maintaining a sustainable balance between her work and personal lives. For Sarah, this opportunity offered a welcoming reprieve from the "enveloping darkness" of despair (Liston, 2000, p.81) that had come so close to jeopardizing her commitment to the field.

Initially, the only discordant note was Sarah's slight discomfort about the rapid pace of change expected by the preschool director. Aware of her new colleagues' anxiety, Sarah tried hard "to reassure them that changes weren't expected overnight". Nevertheless, she was unprepared for the campaign of resistance mounted by a long serving member of staff who bitterly resented the planned changes. Her resistance and Sarah's response are described more fully elsewhere (Author, under review).

In brief, to her distress, Sarah found that she lacked the emotional resilience to withstand the sustained campaign orchestrated by this staff member. "I was still heading along my rainbow path but it was like one of those [strangler] vines, was trampling all over me, choking me. I was getting smaller and smaller under so much pressure", Sarah recalled (see Figure 8).

Figure 8: The choking vine

Within weeks, Sarah's personal and professional confidence had been severely undermined, precipitating an emotional and physical collapse. In despair, Sarah resigned from her position and decided to leave the field. To borrow from Liston (2000), for Sarah, "the promises of [early childhood] education to transform, ennoble, and enable, to create the conditions for new understandings of our world, ...[had] become tired and devalued promissory notes" (p.81). Her rainbow-colored path had dissipated.

Discussion

It is not possible to generalize from one early childhood educator's experiences. Nor is it advisable, on the basis of a single case study, to offer prescriptive suggestions. One of the strengths of an evocative case study, however, is its capacity to "invite the readers into conversation and to compare their own experience and understanding with that described in the case study" (Bullough, Knowles & Cole, 1991, p.12). It is

through these conversations that we can further collective understandings. In what follows, I outline what I think might be potentially fruitful directions for future conversations about, and investigations of, attrition. In doing so, I pose questions that may have potential to encourage consideration of the tensions and dilemmas illuminated by this case study.

First, there seems a need to focus on the interplay between personal, relational and contextual influences if we are to develop a more comprehensive understanding of attrition. To paraphrase Cole (1992), it seems that the personal qualities that early childhood educators bring to their professional practice, the contexts in which they work and the people with whom they interact may influence, in important ways, their decision to make a long term commitment to, or to leave, the field. As this case study has shown, interconnecting influences seemed instrumental in Sarah's decision to leave the field. It may be appropriate, then, for future investigations of attrition to adopt a more holistic focus than has generally been evident previously.

In part, this shift in focus might involve investigating the impact upon early childhood educators of the contexts in which they work. To this end, we might ask: "What workplace conditions and relationships are necessary to retain early childhood educators?" and "How can these conditions and relationships be created?". In light of the way in which Sarah's earlier metaphors shaped her subsequent perceptions and experiences in the field, it might also be useful to ask: "How can prospective early childhood educators be prepared for the possibility that they might encounter less than ideal workplace conditions and relationships?" and "How might neophyte early childhood educators be assisted to cultivate positive conditions and relationships in their workplaces?" The following questions might assist in teasing out facets of some of the issues, tensions and dilemmas involved:

- Should we be doing more to prepare prospective early childhood educators for the "emotionality" of teaching (Little, 1996) and to some of the potential costs involved?
- Do we do enough to alert prospective early childhood educators to the "social and political realities" (Schoonmaker, 1998, p. 563) of early childhood workplaces?
- How might we facilitate a balanced focus on prospective early childhood educators' professional development as individuals and as self-in-relation-to-others?

- How can we balance preparing prospective early childhood educators for the personal-professional landscape of their classrooms and for the communal professional landscape of the early childhood setting as a whole?
- Do we need to do more to help prospective early childhood educators develop an understanding of positionality within the broader communal professional landscape (Price & Valli, 2000)?
- Should we be doing more to support prospective early childhood educators who have positioned themselves as agents of change?
- Would it be helpful to alert prospective early childhood educators to accounts of professional journeys, professional concerns, career stages and life cycles? (See for e.g. Huberman, 1989; Katz, 1972).
- If we accept that "relationships that are formed, nurtured, and dissolved in the professional context are influenced by and continue to influence both the personal and the professional growth of the engaged participants" (Cole, 1992, p. 365), can we do more to foster positive and sustaining relationships in early childhood settings?
- What additional aspects of early childhood work environments might require attention in order to sustain enthusiasm and career commitment?
- How can we provide a more effective balance of challenge and support for prospective, neophyte and experienced early childhood educators and ensure ongoing opportunities for professional growth?

These questions point to the need for collaborative efforts by teacher educators, employers, and early childhood educators, if we are to address and stem attrition. In the following and final section, I consider what contribution metaphor might play as an heuristic tool for informing such efforts.

It seems to me that Sarah's metaphors constituted a coherent but flexible frame through which she interpreted her becoming, being, and unbecoming an early childhood educator. As her journey unfolded, she sought new metaphors that more meaningfully represented her experiences and her evolving understandings. In this way, her metaphors facilitated her journey. They also shaped the nature of that journey. Her metaphor of the "theme park", for example, reflected her decision to retreat to her own classroom and encouraged her to focus her energies on creating the "small world" of her vision. Thus, it played a role in positioning her within the

communal-professional landscape of the school in a way that heightened her perceptions of isolation. This example illustrates how metaphors have the power "to create a reality ... that becomes a deeper reality when we begin to act in terms of it" (Lakoff & Johnson, pp. 144-145).

There may be scope to harness this self-fulfilling quality of metaphors in efforts to stem attrition. The sharing of metaphors seems particularly important. Collegial conversations about one's experiences, interpretations of those experiences and expectations as an early childhood educator and how these might be represented metaphorically may generate insights into one's own and others' perspectives and actions. One outcome might be to enhance workplace relationships. Another might be to assist early childhood educators to recognize the ways in which their metaphors shape, as well as reflect, their experiences. A third outcome might be to encourage early childhood educators to explore ways of reframing their metaphors so that they become more personally and professional sustaining. Conceivably, had Sarah opportunities to engage in these kinds of conversations with her colleagues, she might have been able to sustain her career commitment.

Finally, while metaphors can highlight certain aspects of our experiences and understandings, they may leave others in shadow (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). We learn little from Sarah's metaphors, for example, about whether conflicting demands on her time or ambiguous responsibilities, both of which have been identified as contributors to burnout (Goelman & Guo, 1998), played a role in her diminishing commitment. Thus, we can anticipate that, as a method of investigation, metaphor analysis will illuminate some, but not all, aspects of complex phenomena such as attrition. Nevertheless, as Lakoff and Johnson (1980) contend, metaphor appears a useful tool for "trying to comprehend partially what cannot be comprehended totally" (p.193). As such, it seems timely to explore further the potential of metaphor to enhance our efforts to understand and stem attrition.

Notes

* Pseudonyms are used throughout and identifying details have been changed to preserve confidentiality and anonymity.

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